

Flair-Dragon: Too late now

Chad

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If it were still 1988, hard-core wrestling aficionados would be salivating at the thought of Sunday's main event at the "SuperBrawl '91" pay-per-view show from St. Petersburg.



Perhaps the two best in-ring performers in the world over the past decade were Japan's Tatsumi (Dragon) Fujinami and Ric Flair. Although they have wrestled each other only once, the similarities in their careers and styles is uncanny.

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BY DAVE MELTZER
FOR THE NATIONAL

Both are about the same size (Fujinami is 5 foot 10, 238 pounds, Flair is 6 feet, 235), and have had a similar amount of experience. Both were best known for an ability to make their opponents seem better than they really were.

Instead of a fancy hold or two, they relied on their ability to know when to do the move and on conditioning. These attributes allowed both to endure as main-eventers and hold major championships since the 1970s. Flair's seven World Championship Wrestling (formerly NWA) world championship titles ties the alltime record for a championship that dates back to 1905. Fujinami's four titles as world champion in Japan is an alltime record, and he also held the WWF world junior heavyweight championship for three years earlier in his career.

Many fans speculated that a Flair-Fujinami match would have rivaled the classic Flair-Ricky Steamboat matches or the Jack Brisco-Dory Funk encounters that became known worldwide as the classics of the '70s. But for political reasons having to do with promotional barriers, the two never faced off until March 21 at the Tokyo Egg Dome. While their match was a good one, it disappointed many.

In the wrestling story line, both Flair and Fujinami went into the Tokyo match claiming to be world heavyweight champion. A disputed finish in that match set up Sunday's rematch. Flair held the WCW version. Fujinami held the IWGP (Japanese) version. To the live crowd and on Japanese television, it appeared that Fujinami had won when he pinned Flair. When the match aired in the U.S., however, it was pointed out that Fujinami had flipped Flair over the top rope — an automatic disqualification under WCW rules — moments before his pin. In this country therefore, Flair is still regarded as WCW champion. Fujinami, at least in Japan, is referred to as both IWGP and NWA champion.

But disputed finish or not, it was apparent that it was no longer 1988. And the clock probably can't be turned back three years on Sunday either.

ETC: Perhaps the biggest question on Sunday's show is whether or not Sid Vicious will appear to wrestle El Gigante in a match in which the loser must get carried out on a stretcher. Vicious is supposed to get a contract release from WCW after Sunday's card to join the rival WWF. The last-minute betting line is that Vicious will appear, but that his match will be switched to Gigante vs. One Man Gang... It appears Big Van Vader will leave WCW because of an impasse over merchandising rights to his gimmick.